

Lostine Corridor Public Safety Project WILD AND SCENIC SECTION 7(A) EVALUATION

Introduction

Congress designated the Lostine River as a Wild and Scenic River in 1988. The Wild and Scenic designation ensures that the free-flowing character and the river's outstandingly remarkable values (ORVs) for which it was designated are preserved. The USDA Forest Service is the responsible federal agency for administration of the Lostine River.

Per Section 7(a) of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, the responsible federal agency must make a determination if a proposed water resources project will have adverse effects upon values for which the river was designated and/or its free flowing character. This document will make that determination following the evaluation procedure documented in the Wild and Scenic Rivers Reference Guide.

The Lostine Corridor Public Safety Project is proposed within the recreational designated section of the Lostine Wild and Scenic River.

Current Condition

The Forest Service documented declining forest health conditions in the Lostine Corridor a quarter of a century ago (1993, USDA Lostine Wild and Scenic River Environmental Assessment):

“Forest lands in the Lostine River Canyon have been subjected to increasing damage due to insects and disease. Present forest health problems are associated with stand overstocking, drought induced tree stress, 90 years of fire exclusion, and selective timber harvesting which has favored the establishment of shade tolerant tree species such as true firs. These tree species are very susceptible and vulnerable to damage and mortality from forest pests such as bark beetles, defoliators, and root rot diseases. Overall, the forested stands within the Lostine River drainage are in a poor state of forest health.” (pg. 1-4)

There has been very little forest vegetation management in the corridor since this observation and the condition has only continued to decline.

Proposed Action

The proposed actions consist of activities to address the public safety effects and consequences of insect and disease (both presence and future risks), and of high stand densities and fuel loads in the project area. The activities include thinning trees up to 21” dbh trees in upland units, reducing fuel loads by thinning smaller trees (generally up to 9” dbh), removal of hazard trees along travel routes and adjacent to developed sites, and creating nine small (2 acres) openings to help break up continuity of fuels.

The proposed actions would meet the Blue Mountain Aquatic and Riparian Project Design Criteria (PDCs). A letter of concurrence for the Blue Mountain Expedited Section 7 Consultation Process was received 12/7/2016.

The Forest Service followed guidance in the Lostine Wild and Scenic River plan (River Plan, 1993) to apply silvicultural treatments, as needed, to protect ORVs, public safety or address effects from insects and disease (pgs. 6, 12). They also developed mitigation measures that would address the ORVs so that proposed actions would either be neutral or beneficial over the long term. It is recognized that there may be minor short term effects on recreation and scenic quality during project development.

Designation and ORVs

The Lostine Safety Project is located within the Lostine River Corridor (outside the wilderness boundary) (see Figure 1), and is classified as “Recreational”. The River Plan describes the desired future condition of the recreational segment of the river corridor as

“...free of impoundments and be readily accessible from roads. Some major public use facilities such as developed campgrounds, administrative buildings, bridges, or private residences will remain in the corridor. Although developments, timber harvest, and other activities may occur and be evident near the river, management shall protect and enhance outstandingly remarkable values, free flow and other river-related values. A range of recreation opportunities will be available in settings in which interactions are relatively high and visitors are likely to share their recreational experience with other individuals or groups.” (pg. 5)

The congressionally authorized study of the Lostine River identified five Outstandingly Remarkable Values for which the river was designated:

Scenic - Dominated by a diverse landscape creating high quality natural scenery. Manmade developments have a primitive, historic, or rustic setting.

Recreation - Provides a combination of recreational activities including hunting, fishing, sightseeing, horseback riding, hiking, snowmobiling, and camping. Dispersed camping as well as developed camping are the dominant use along the river. Other recreation activities include picnicking, mushroom picking, photography, skiing, and other uses.

Fisheries - Includes the population and habitat of the threatened spring and fall Snake River Chinook salmon, steelhead, and bull trout.

Wildlife - Includes wildlife populations and habitat in the Lostine River corridor such as Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep. It also includes a variety of other species such as, but not limited to, mule deer, elk, and black bear.

Vegetation/Botanical – known for its unique habitat for moonwort and several other plant species.

Potential effects of Proposed Actions

This section considers potential effects of the proposed actions on the free-flowing character of the recreational river segment, and on the ORVs identified in the Lostine W&S River Plan.

Free-flow – There are no actions proposed that would occur within the high water level of the Lostine River and therefore there would be no direct effects on the free-flowing character of the river. In addition, the proposed actions are designed to meet the Blue Mountain aquatic PDCs are not predicted to have any indirect effect on free flow.

Scenic Quality – The Lostine River Viewshed Plan (1992) describes the desired scenic condition within the corridor to include a balance of open and closed forest spaces, views of distant peaks and open meadows, a variety of tree species and with mixed ages, and a predominance of open-type character of larch and pine species.

The decline in forest health in the river corridor is resulting in a decline in the ability to meet the desired scenic quality. Previously green forest stands are experiencing increasing mortality and becoming dense with less diversity in species composition. This can reduce visitor's satisfaction with scenic quality as they view increasing pockets of dying (red and brown) trees and increased downed trees around recreation areas (hazard trees). In addition, high stand densities and increasing mortality may reduce the ability to retain features (live and healthy forested stands, forest cover, views of wildlife, etc...) that contribute to high scenic quality over the long term.

The proposed actions are intended to move forest conditions toward the desired state and reduce the risks of severe impacts to the forested stands, which make up much of the scenic character of Lostine Corridor.

It is recognized that there would be short term visible effects of the proposed action during implementation and immediately after, including working equipment, decks of logs and slash prior to being removed/burned, some denuded soils where equipment travels over ground that is not snow-covered, and cut tree stumps prior to low-cutting adjacent to recreation areas. The Lostine Corridor is generally a highly productive growing site and new ground vegetation (shrubs, forbs and grasses) is expected to recover and grow quickly into areas where thinning occurs, thus reducing the visibility of management activities.

Mitigation measures proposed to help reduce these affects include low-cutting stumps in high visibility areas, designing thinning units so the remaining stand has variability (avoid even spacing) and disposing of slash in a timely manner. There are no predicted long-term negative effects on scenic quality.

Recreation – People have been enjoying the Lostine Corridor as a recreation destination for almost a century, as a place to picnic and camp in developed sites, and to fish and enjoy the river. The dense forest canopy has provided thermal relief during the heat of summer. The corridor also has several trailheads that provide staging for travel into the Eagle Cap Wilderness for hikers, horse users, and hunters.

Declining forest health is affecting current recreation experiences by changes in scenic quality (see above) and increases in downed trees in recreation sites and on roadways, often blocking access to recreation opportunities. An increase in hazard trees is also increasing the risks to public safety for those traveling in and using the corridor.

The proposed actions are intended to reduce the risk of impacts to the recreation setting, forested stands, and recreation infrastructure from a potential wildfire or insect and disease event. While the density of the forested stands would be reduced under the proposed actions, there would still be sufficient canopy to provide thermal cover, particularly since thinning activities would be concentrated away from most recreation sites. In addition, the remaining stands would be more resilient to potential impacts and would appear healthier (reduction in dead and dying trees). The healthier stand conditions and removal of trees identified as a hazard would reduce the risks to public safety and allow people to better access recreation opportunities.

There will likely be short term effects on recreation during project implementation including the sights and sounds of a harvest operation which may reduce the quality of the recreation experience for some visitors. Where feasible, the harvest operations would occur during the season when recreation use is low (late fall, winter, spring) to mitigate these potential effects. There are no predicted long-term negative effects on recreation.

Fisheries – The Lostine River provides habitat for three listed as threatened fish species under the Endangered Species Act (ESA); bull trout, chinook salmon, and steelhead, listed as threatened. The project is designed to meet the Blue Mountain Project Design Criteria for Aquatic Habitat and it has been determined that the proposed actions may affect but are not likely to adversely affect listed species. Most of the activities would occur outside of Riparian Habitat Conservation Areas (RHCAs) except for thinning smaller material by hand, felling of hazard trees, and removal of hazard trees by equipment that does not leave the roadway.

The proposed actions are expected to reduce the risk of severe impacts to the forested stands in the project area. This in turn will reduce the risk of losing important riparian features including shading and reduce risks of sedimentation that could occur after a fire event. A high intensity disturbance event could increase of snags availability of large woody debris to the river. However, this amount would be delivered within a short timeframe after the event, but could be deficient for many decades after the event.

Wildlife – The wildlife ORV focused on habitat for big horn sheep which may be present in the upper reaches of the corridor (Wild section of the Lostine which is outside the project

area) and have been observed in adjacent peaks and ridge tops. The river plan identified other species that contributed to this value included bear, mule deer, elk, black bear, bald eagles, and peregrine falcons. There are no wildlife species listed under the Endangered Species Act (ESA).

Proposed activities may modify habitat conditions in treated stands from very dense to moderately dense. These modifications would occur in less than 1% of the available habitat in the watershed where the project occurs, and therefore are not expected to have a measurable effect on individual animals that may be affected.

Proposed actions are intended to reduce the risk to loss of wildlife habitat features in the event of a high severity disturbance. Mitigations measure to support habitat include no treatment around occupied raptor nests and retention of standing and downed wood to meet ecological requirements.

Botanical – The Lostine Corridor is rich in botanical resources, including an unusual concentration of moonworts. Many of the plant species are listed on the Region 6 Sensitive Species List. There are no plant species listed under the ESA. Proposed actions are intended to reduce the risk of loss of habitat for sensitive species in the event of a high severity disturbance. Mitigation measures to protect individuals and habitat of sensitive plant species include avoid ground disturbance such as skidding trees or burning piles.

This project will have no effect on any threatened or endangered plant species and will not result in moving any Region 6 sensitive plant species or species of special interest towards federal listing.

Section 7 Determination

The proposed project would not affect the free flowing character of the Lostine River. The project has also been designed to mitigate short-term effects on the ORVs identified in the Lostine Wild and Scenic River Plan, and is expected to have neutral or beneficial effects in sustaining the ORVs in the long-term.

Figure 1: Map of Lostine W&S River (Recreational Segment)

